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DE RUEHLB #1981/01 3551412

ZNY CCCCC ZZH

P 211412Z DEC 07

FM AMEMBASSY BEIRUT

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0540

INFO RUEHEE/ARAB LEAGUE COLLECTIVE

RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES COLLECTIVE

RUEHNO/USMISSION USNATO 2042

RHMFISS/CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL

RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 001981

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NSC FOR ABRAMS/SINGH/GAVITO/YERGER

E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/07/2017

TAGS: PGOV PREL LE

SUBJECT: LEBANON: WITH A/S WELCH, HARIRI STEADFAST; WANTS  
MORE PRESSURE ON SYRIA

REF: BEIRUT 1960

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires William Grant for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) During December 15, 18, and 19 meetings with majority leader Saad Hariri, NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch and DAPNSA Elliott Abrams (at the 18th and 19th meetings) reiterated U.S. support for March 14's resistance to the opposition's attempts to force concessions from the majority before the election of a new president. Hariri was firm about electing a president with no advance deals on the formation of the new government, or relenting on implementation of any UNSC resolutions on Lebanon. Hariri added that presidential candidate General Michel Sleiman was of the same mind, but expected that although pressure was mounting on the opposition, it would continue its delaying strategy at Syria's bidding.

¶2. (C) Hariri complained that Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri is a front for the Syrians, who are set on obstructing the election. Hariri was very concerned about the effect the delay would have on Lebanon economically and security-wise, and predicted a "collapse" within the next two months if the election did not take place soon. A/S Welch briefed Hariri on his December 18 and 19 meetings with Berri (reftel and septel), noting that Berri seemed frustrated, but eager to break the impasse, which he attributed it to a lack of trust between the majority and the opposition.

¶3. (C) A/S Welch reviewed the French leadership's view of its ill-fated initiative and what France and some Arab states now believe could still be done to salvage the situation. Hariri said that the French initiative was dead and had gone awry in Damascus, where the French had given in to Syrian manipulation. Hariri urged enlisting Turkey to pressure Syria, and perhaps also Russia. During the December 18 meeting, Hariri left to take a call from Turkish president Erdogan. When he returned, Hariri said he had been firm with Erdogan that March 14 would not accede to the opposition's demands on formation of a new government in return for agreement on a president. Hariri pressed Welch and Abrams to undertake serious action, such as imposing travel bans on Aoun bloc politicians and prominent Syrians, and expelling the Syrian ambassador to the U.S.

¶4. (C) In the December 19, meeting Hariri outlined how March 14 will proceed, should efforts to elect Sleiman on March 14's terms come to naught. Hariri, PM Siniora, former

President Amin Gemayel, and Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea had decided to have ten MPs submit a petition in parliament for an amendment to the constitution to elect Sleiman. This likely will occur on Saturday December 22. Parliament Speaker Berri will not allow it to move forward, but the thought is that he, not March 14, will be seen as blocking progress. They also will move to reinforce the Siniora cabinet by appointing new ministers to fill at least two Christian vacancies, and perhaps also the five vacancies created by the resignation of all the Shia opposition ministers.

¶15. (C) The meetings also touched on problems related to proceeding with the establishment of the Special Tribunal to try those accused in the assassination of former PM Rafiq Hariri. End summary.

HARIRI FRUSTRATED, BUT STANDING FIRM

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¶16. (C) NEA Assistant Secretary David Welch met with March 14 MP Saad Hariri on December 18 and 19. Also attending were Deputy Advisor to the President and National Security Advisor (DAPNSA) Elliott Abrams (Dec. 18 and 19 only), Charge Bill Grant, NEA Staff Assistant, Druse leader Walid Jumblatt (Dec. 19 only), Hariri advisors Ghattas Khoury and Nader Hariri, and Emboffs. Hariri reiterated March 14's determination to stand fast against opposition pressure to make concessions regarding the formation of the new government. Hariri and his advisors were adamant that deals about the formation of the new government, including agreeing to a one-third opposition blocking minority and relenting on implementation of UNSC Lebanon-related resolutions, were out of the question. Hariri noted that Sleiman was also firm in this

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regard, but predicted the opposition would continue its obstructionist strategy.

¶17. (C) A/S Welch mentioned that Berri told him that he had previously told Hariri that if the majority does not accept a one-third blocking minority for the opposition, then the opposition might leave the government altogether and willingly take on the role of the opposition; Hariri denied Berri had ever offered this to him. He also flatly refused Berri's suggestion that he meet with Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) leader Michel Aoun.

¶18. (C) Hariri was adamant that Syria is the main problem and emphasized that the Syrians would really have to feel the heat from the international community, and especially the U.S. Complaining that Berri was undermining the election of Sleiman as president on orders from the Syrians and by using Aoun as a front, Hariri asserted that only if real pressure were exerted by international players such as Turkey and Russia, in cooperation with the U.S., would Syria back down. Hariri stressed that Turkey was the only regional power that could scare the Syrians and suggested that Turkey might be helpful in producing evidence of Syrian weapons smuggling in Lebanon.

¶19. (C) Hariri assumed Jordan King Abdullah's recent visit to Syrian President Assad was an effort coordinated with the U.S. to stop Syrian meddling in Lebanon. A/S Welch disabused Hariri of this notion, adding that we had not yet seen anything positive resulting from Abdullah's visit or Jordan's outreach to Syria.

FRENCH INITIATIVE AN ALL-ROUND DISAPPOINTMENT

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¶10. (C) Hariri, bitter about the French initiative, asserted that the French envoys had constantly presented him with Syrian-inspired conditions for the election, including agreeing to a cabinet in which the proportional distribution of majority and opposition ministers would give the

opposition a blocking minority. A/S Welch commented that from his talks with French and Arab diplomats on the margins of the Palestinian donors' conference in Paris, the French acknowledge that their initiative is "on life support", and FM Kouchner blames the Syrians as well. French President Sarkozy has indicated he would stay engaged with the efforts to elect Sleiman before the end of the year.

¶11. (C) With regard to stopping Syrian interference, Arab League SYG Amre Moussa was reluctant to take a position against another Arab state, while Saudi FM Saud al-Faisal said that any statement in support of the election must be followed by action in order to be credible. A/S Welch further noted the Arab League is planning an emergency meeting to discuss the election, as well as the Special Tribunal. In this regard, Egypt could be counted on to give real support.

LEBANON HEADING TOWARD "EXPLOSION"?

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¶12. (C) Hariri glumly predicted a "collapse" within the next couple of months, either of the economy, or even March 14, adding that the election impasse was holding up passage of laws and other reforms, resulting in donors holding back on their commitments. He noted that the situation was becoming very dangerous, with a real risk that the people "will explode." This, Hariri asserted, was exactly what the opposition wanted, so the majority would be forced to resort to the army, thus destroying Sleiman's credibility as a presidential candidate. Hariri also noted that Aoun would be politically finished once Sleiman became president, an indication that Christians do not support Aoun as strongly as generally believed. As for Samir Geagea and Amine Gemayel, Hariri said they would come to accept Sleiman gaining Maronite Christian support at their expense.

U.S. WILL STAND BY LEBANON

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¶13. (C) Welch and Abrams assured Hariri that the U.S. would stand by March 14 to ensure that the election took place. He suggested that when March 14 is pressured by the French to make concessions, it should use the U.S. as a counterforce. Welch added that the U.S. could assist March 14 by strengthening Lebanese institutions against Syrian

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infiltration, continuing to build its cooperation with the Lebanese army, and supporting the Maronite Christian community.

¶14. (C) Hariri suggested that the U.S. impose travel sanctions on prominent Christians in Aoun's circle, such as Ibrahim Kenaan or Gebran Bassil. (Note: Bassil is Aoun's closest advisor, as well as his son-in-law. End note.) Hariri also raised the names of prominent Syrians whom he thought could be hit with a travel ban to the U.S. for illegal financial dealings. Abrams stressed that U.S. authorities would need hard evidence before such action could be taken. Hariri also pressed for the expulsion of the Syrian Ambassador to the United States. Welch and Abrams explained to Hariri that it was extremely rare for the U.S. to expel an ambassador, although it had already gone halfway by recalling the U.S. Ambassador to Damascus. They assured him, however, that the U.S. was increasingly focused on Lebanon, and considering tough measures to use against Syria.

GRANT